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# THE RELIGIOUS BREAKDOWN OF THE MINISTRY

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GEORGE A. COE

The Union Theological Seminary, New York City

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Does not the Christian ministry of our country show signs of breaking down religiously? The emphasis of this question is upon "religiously" quite as much as upon "breaking down." We often concern ourselves with external obstacles to ministerial success, and occasionally with the defects of ministers, but we seldom raise the fundamental question whether in the first and distinctive matters of their calling they are on the right track. Suppose they should succeed in ministering to us precisely as they desire to do: in what sense and to what extent would this be a Christian ministry?

This theme does not invite to fault-finding, but to something far more thoughtful. Finding fault with ministers is an old amusement, but it requires so little in the way of either intelligence or skill—for there are no rules of the game—that it can hardly be regarded even as good sport. On the other hand, criticism, in the more technical sense, is distinguished by care both in choosing standards and in weighing performance or product. Moreover, serious criticism itself has several possible levels, and many methods. We might, for example, pass judgment upon the status of a profession by first assuming an arbitrary standard of perfect performance and then showing at what point between this and zero the average or median individual stands. The details might be handled after the manner of bookkeeping, the strong and weak points being recorded, added, and subtracted. A critic who employs this method takes the standpoint of an outsider; at his best he would be like a judge of a court, who must have no financial or family connection with any litigant. The churches

and the ministry have been subjected to much criticism of this general type, but how much they have profited by it one cannot say with confidence.

A far different approach is possible, one in which the critic endeavors to think with the minister, not merely about him. By thinking with him is not meant hunting for extenuating circumstances, but rather seeking a clear definition of purposes and of relative values, and then a corresponding evaluation of the policies that are pursued. One who had printed a critical and largely unfavorable review of a certain book received from the author of it a letter saying, "Such a review as yours helps a thinker to understand himself." It is not offering incense to strange gods, then, if one asks whether we Christians, even in what we call Christian, have grown conventional and therefore dull in our appreciation of what is central in our religion. We do not bring into question the sincerity, devotedness, or ability of our leaders, if we inquire whether they really know where the sharp edge of Christianity is, and whether their present policies can bring us to the goal of our Christian hopes. Such inquiries are a form of co-operation.

In our part of the world the Christian religion has been free to utter itself for several generations. It has placed ministers in almost every community; preaching—plenty of it—has been accessible to nearly the entire population, and has had a rather general hearing; evangelism, moreover, has constantly gone outside the stated church services in order to reach the masses; enormous use has been made of the press; millions of children are constantly under the tuition of the churches; almost everybody has a "church affiliation"—in short, the religion of our ministers has had abundant opportunity to make itself known to a population that is counted as, on the whole, intelligent. Would there be anything unfair in the assumption that this population must by this time have caught the main point: that what our religion is fundamentally for and fundamentally against must be clear? As clear, for

example, as the popular apprehension of the antagonism between the steel trust and organized labor? I have in mind nothing that requires historical insight, or systematic thinking, or even ability to state an article of a creed, but only rudimentary apprehension of any central issue that the ministers have actually pressed upon the conscience of the people. Surely spiritual clarity in the pulpit and in the guidance of religious instruction could hardly result in spiritual ignorance and confusion. Let us remember that our ministers have had a fair opportunity to make themselves understood, and that they have had a remarkably large direct hearing besides being able to guide the teaching activities of multitudes of laymen. Yet who does not know that the populace is ignorant of any specific, sharp issues for which the clergy as a whole stands? The English and American reports on conditions in the armies<sup>1</sup> have awakened little or no surprise on the part of those of us who have approached our religion from the educational point of view. We have known that spiritual illiteracy abounds in the churches themselves, and we have repeatedly pointed out some of the reasons for it. Among the seasoned leaders in the reform of religious education there is a widespread conviction that the greatest single obstacle to this reform is the inertia of ministers. This inertia is present in what is certainly central and crucial in our religion. Everybody knows that ministers stand for goodness in general, and against wickedness in general, and this is no slight ground for praise. But what is the Christian view of wickedness and of goodness? What is the main point? Wherein should we expect a Christian to differ from anybody else? On vital points like this the ministry as a whole has not spoken so that the populace can understand.

If we hesitate to place so much stress upon the state of the popular mind, let us limit our inquiry to members of the churches. Suppose we were able to ask of them, What do you

<sup>1</sup> *The Army and Religion*. Association Press, New York, 1920. *Religion among American Men*. Association Press, New York, 1920.

judge that the ministry stands for with life-and-death seriousness? We should learn much, no doubt, of the amiability of the clergy, of their high character, of their sympathetic helpfulness, of their general support of conventional ethical standards. But the names of many of them would call up no focalized message, and, for the rest, the issues that would come to mind are, with occasional exceptions, such as these: some view, orthodox or otherwise, of the Scriptures or of dogmas; some ideal of churchmanship, or the promotion of church enterprises; some reform, as temperance, or some sin, as worldly amusements; some mode of piety, mystical or other; the conversion of sinners. The importance of these interests is not here called into question, least of all the last named. The conversion of sinners might be so conceived as to offer us the great characteristic issue for which we are looking. But until there is far sharper definition than now prevails of what we are to be converted from and what we are to be converted to, even a life-and-death purpose to win converts will remain, like the evangelism that we know, as only one item in a miscellany of ends that have no obvious co-ordinating or central principle. The members of the churches themselves cannot tell what dominant issue the ministry as a whole stands for.

Another approach to the same phase of our problem may be put thus: What have the members of the churches been led by their pastors to understand as the meaning of church membership? Let not this question be confused with popular flings at the inconsistencies of Christians. The point concerns their conscious standards of the Christian profession and life, not their successes and failures as measured by these or any other standards. Here, surely, is a perfectly fair test of ministers. For, before a candidate is received into full membership in a church the minister instructs him or sees to it that he is instructed in the meaning of the step, and then examines and approves him. Moreover, though the minister

may be relatively unknown to many in the community, he has opportunity to enlighten his own congregation upon the way of life not less often than once a week. Yet the ideas of church members concerning the significance of their membership, like the ideas of the general populace concerning the Christian religion, are partly vague and partly miscellaneous and unco-ordinated. That I am a church member means that I have been converted; that I believe the Christian doctrines; that I go to church; that I partake of the bread and grape juice of the communion; that I abstain from killing, stealing, lying, liquor, and fornication; that I am benevolent; that I pray, and use the other means of grace; that I support church enterprises with my money and my labor—is not this a fair inventory of current ideas as far as they are at all definite?

That these standards are not insignificant goes without saying. It is no slight thing to have in every community an organization and a voice that constantly speak for so much that is good. But we are not at all concerned at this moment with the question whether the church is worth while. Of course it is. Our sole concern is to know what ministers think about the function of the church, and to evaluate what we find. In the churches we behold a vast number of men; men who have responded to what they regard as the call of God; men to whom this means pursuing good and not evil. Here is potential spiritual energy so vast that if it were directed toward a definite objective it would be irresistible. Here are enormous investments of money, and even these represent but a fraction of what church members could give to any cause that was dearer to them than life. If church membership meant that there is such a cause, imagination can hardly picture the possible results. It is clear, however, that the ministry has not succeeded in impressing upon the laity that church membership has any such meaning as this. The natural inference is that the ministry itself does

not think in such terms. We must assume, of course, that our leaders might make the attempt to impress an ideal upon their followers, and yet fail. Certainly some ministers, in the aggregate a considerable number, have seen a vision, and have endeavored to communicate it. They have found in the gospel such big, inclusive conceptions, a revelation of such overwhelming needs, an experience of power so adequate for these needs, such a foretaste of a regenerated world, that they have said to their brethren, "Come, let us mass all our forces upon these great world-objectives." But the response from their brethren in the ministry has been so slight that there is not the least ground for supposing that the situation in the laity is due to unresponsiveness toward clerical leadership. No; the clerical profession as a whole has not espoused any such large and aggressive cause as vital to the meaning of church membership.<sup>1</sup>

But perhaps we ought not to seek an index of the ministry in the everyday, commonplace life of the churches. One might plausibly argue that, just as we did not perceive the heroic qualities of the holder of a Carnegie medal until he had an opportunity to risk his life to save that of a drowning person, so the religious vitality of the ministerial profession will fully demonstrate itself only in times of unusual moral stress and danger. Well, we have had opportunity to see what clergymen do in spiritual emergencies as well as in the common day. Was there ever a greater spiritual emergency, in fact, than that which the Great War precipitated? Here,

<sup>1</sup> The criticisms thus far made do not apply equally to the Protestant and the Catholic clergy. Every intelligent Catholic has definite and correct ideas as to what his priest stands for, and of the meaning of membership in the Catholic church. This gives the advantage of a unified and determined front, indeed, but the ulterior problem here concerns the ends prescribed by the hierarchy to the faithful. To save one's own soul by obeying an autocratic spiritual authority, and to contribute to the final and complete triumph of this autocracy—this conception of spiritual life, duty, and destiny makes the problem of the priest too simple. He can fulfil his essential functions by performing certain prescribed operations in his strictly official capacity (*ex opere operato*), and teaching certain doctrines and duties already strictly formulated. The problem of the Protestant minister goes many fathoms deeper than this.

surely, were issues sufficient to stimulate to the utmost whatever there was of conscience in men. Here were moral confusions to be cleared up; here were temptations as vast as empires to be met; here, if ever, the difference between the Kingdom of God and every other aim in life needed to be brought to the fore in men's thinking concerning the future of society. If ever in the history of man a "Thus saith the Lord" was needed, it was needed then. Yet the ministry in general had nothing distinctive to offer. Here and there a little group—Quakers for instance—bore testimony by word and deed to something specific that they thought they had received from God. A few individuals paused to ask whither the spirit of Jesus would lead us in the world welter, and a few endeavored to weigh in Christian scales the principles upon which our contemporary society is so bunglingly organized. A few gestures of friendship were directed by ecclesiastical groups toward members of Christian communions in enemy countries. But the masses of the clergy took their cues concerning the great issues of the time from the same prompters to whom the worldlings who control our newspapers turned for guidance.

It is only fair to say that the clergy employed their faith in God and a future life so as to bring comfort to the suffering and the bereaved, and that many ministers, working among our soldiers and sailors, brought to multitudes of individuals strength to endure temptation and hardship. We do not undervalue such services if we point out that, on the other hand, the attitudes taken by the generality of ministers toward the major moral problems—problems that concern the meaning and ends of our organized life—were little if at all affected by religion. In all good works of mercy and help they labored as equals with those not of the faith. In speech and in print they supported, on the whole, just what non-Christians supported. It is not evident that their position on the great issues differed from that of plain secularists—apparently their religion had no contribution at this point.



Of course the ministers prayed, but into their prayers they poured the very desires that secularists and they had in common. Of course they searched the Scriptures, and there, to be sure, they found texts that fitted the spirit of the times! Can anyone show a plausible reason for believing that if the clergy as a whole, adopting an "interim ethics," had taken a vacation from their pulpits for the duration of the war, the mind of the church, as far as the main issues of the hour are concerned, would have been appreciably affected? Would not the newspapers have taken care of the consciences of church members as well as their spiritual shepherds did? I am amazed at myself for asking this question; all my training prompts me to reject the implications of it. But the evidence must decide, and the evidence does not show that our tragic moral emergency evoked from the clergy, except in a few instances, any guidance or inspiration that had a specifically Christian source or character. The clergy did count, and that splendidly, but it was not their religion that counted.

A similar lack of religious distinction meets us when we ask what attitudes the clergy take toward several ethical problems of our domestic policies and conduct. For example, what have our spiritual guides found in the Christian religion that bears upon the proper treatment of conscientious objectors? Only a bare handful of ministers seem to see that freedom of conscience and humane treatment of prisoners are religious issues at all! No one will claim that the course that events have taken has been influenced by our religion, which has remained, in the persons of its official representatives, acquiescent and aloof. I forget! One minister did propose that conscientious objectors should be deprived of the right to vote, and another wrote with a sneer of their sufferings. Perhaps, after all, the ministry had more influence than I have just now attributed to it. I am far from intending to approve or condemn, at present, the conduct of our government in

this matter; the whole point is that the clergy as a whole showed no positive sign that the matter interested them as Christians. Unless we assume that they are ignorant that the relation of human government to the conscience of the citizen is counted a great point in religious history and in the conception of modern civilization, we must conclude that the explanation of their attitude is to be sought in the realm of spiritual sensitiveness.

No Protestant who is informed on the history of his faith will deny that freedom of speech and of assemblage is a matter in which religion is deeply concerned. What, then, is the attitude of the clergy toward the suppression of freedom of speech and of assemblage in our country at the present moment? Since this suppression is effected not in spite of government, but by using the police power itself, we have before us all the elements of an issue which in other days provoked appeals to the will of God. But times have changed. The old problem is here, but those who speak for God are, with a few notable exceptions, silent. The events that are occurring under our eyes strike no religious chord, and church members are receiving their guidance in this tremendous issue almost exclusively from extra-ecclesiastical sources.<sup>1</sup>

The relation of the clergy to the ethical issues involved in our economic and industrial life is distinctly better. With some approach to unanimity they opposed the liquor traffic, and with complete unanimity they favor a rest day for workers, generally on humanitarian and not merely ecclesiastical grounds. Further, they have taken high ground, in the social creed of the churches and elsewhere, upon child labor, the labor of women, and other industrial problems. The interchurch investigation of labor conditions in the steel

<sup>1</sup> In respect to issues such as these the failure of the Catholic clergy is more profound than that of the Protestant. For, (1) no one but the pope may assume prophetic functions in the church, and (2) the pope is so hedged about by traditions that must not be contradicted that even he becomes little more than a warder of the *status quo*. The inability of the head of the church to cope with the problem of the historical criticism of the Scriptures is typical.

industry speaks in unmistakable terms of the spiritual aggressiveness of the group that carried it through. But there is an underlying and all-pervading ethical issue, not at all foreign to historical Christianity, upon which no clear guidance is to be had from the generality of ministers. In order to make sure that I shall not be misunderstood when I state what this issue is, a paragraph must be devoted to certain distinctions.

Condemnation of ministers based upon the assumption that they ought to be competent as technical economists, sociologists, or statesmen, is to be resisted and refused all standing. It is criticism of the first type mentioned at the beginning of this article, and it is erroneous because of a false standard arbitrarily assumed. Likewise, to demand of ministers such fabulous wisdom as to be able to tell just what to do in every troublesome situation is unjust for the same reason. But, though the Christian minister be not a social researcher or a social engineer, he is, by the nature of his office, a guide and inspirer of social ends and motives. Though he decline to judge whether the timbers of a certain bridge will bear a certain load, he must be ready to say whether the road that goes over this bridge runs east or north. And not only must he seek to be expert in discriminating motives and ultimate ends; he must also take account of the conditions that further or hinder these motives and ends. That is, he must be a critic of social organization and process, and particularly of the human product thereof. Though he is not required to be a church architect, he must be able to judge whether a given edifice is adapted to the needs that called it into being. To what extent does our social order aim to produce, and succeed in producing, the best sort of men and women, specifically men and women related to one another as members of a family of God? The major part—by far the major part—of men's thoughts and purposes and labors arise within our economic order and refer to economic ends. This is life; this is where meaning must be found; this is precisely where ideals belong.

The minister must understand it, judge it, and in view of its products suggest needed changes in aim and motive. It is his function to utter the divine will with respect to the fundamental ethics of our organized life, and not less to call, whenever necessary, for social repentance and regeneration.

Is a system in which one works for wages and another for profits fundamentally Christian, anti-Christian, or neutral? Are its motives Christian? What is the effect upon character of the repeated exercise of its motives? What is the actual outcome as respects the relation of man to man? Here we are concerned with the meaning and value of life. Our question leads straight back to Jesus and straight forward to any vision that we dare indulge concerning the coming of the Kingdom of God. It is not answered by any position we may take upon such special problems as hours of labor or prevention of industrial accidents; much less can any talk of a fair wage so much as touch it. It is the great parting of the ways for the Christian ethics of society. The ministry must take upon this question an open stand that is definitely Christian or lose its soul.

We have needed guidance on this point—O how sorely!—for years. Industrialism has developed its logic far faster than our ethical insight into the new conditions has grown. For many years, too, voices have been challenging us to face this issue, so that we can hardly plead that we have not had time to find an answer. “And while men slept, an enemy came and sowed tares.” Opposing forces are gathering—enormous forces on both sides—to attempt the solution of this fundamental ethical problem by a clash of non-ethical weapons. And the Christian ministry is looking on!

It is needless to pursue the theme farther. If the nature and the functions of the Christian religion are what I have assumed them to be, and if the facts are as I have alleged, then the answer to the question with which we started is before us. The conclusion, let it be noted, does not depend upon dissent

from anything that ministers teach, or upon disapproval of anything that they do. Our question concerns their grasp of religious problems as religious, and their conception of their calling as they reveal it in their practice. What has been indicated is, in part, lack of point, and tendency to blur; in part, lack of religious perspective even where devotion is focalized; in part, failure to recognize vital religious issues when they arise.